

How to Build a Pyramid in the 21st Century

By

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How exactly the Egyptians built their pyramids remains a mystery. Over a hundred of these ancient stone structures, among the largest human structures ever built, stand out in sharp contrast to their flat, empty, desert habitats, often with no other stones in sight. How did they do it? How did they manage to move huge blocks, some weighing as many as ten tons, miles across the sands with no cranes or tractor trailers, then shape and stack them in the just the right order to fashion near perfect triangles, which had stood as the tallest structures in the world for nearly 4,000 years, and have lasted to this day?

Nobody knows for sure how they did it, but there are some pretty good guesses about a bit of what they did. The authors of a book on *Computational Thinking* say “the Egyptian engineers who built the pyramids beginning around 2700 BCE obviously knew a lot about geometry and were able to calculate the dimensions and angles of stone for each part of the pyramid and of the leverage of ropes, pulleys, and rollers to move the stones into position.”¹ Just a few years ago, in 2018, an international archeological team led by The French Institute for Oriental Archeology, discovered a 4,500 year-old ramp system used to haul alabaster stone from a quarry that was used to build the Great Pyramid of Giza, the largest and oldest pyramid in the world. According to one of the teams’ researchers, Dr. Yannis Gourdon, “This system if composed of a central ramp flanked by two staircases with numerous post holes. Using a sled which carried a stone block and was attached with ropes to these wooden posts, ancient Egyptians were able to pull up the alabaster blocks out of the quarry on very steep slopes of 20% or more.”² There’s also a nearly 4,000-year-old wall painting that’s been discovered in an ancient tomb that depicts 172 workers pulling a rope attached to a sledge carrying a gigantic Egyptian statue. Another worker is pouring water on the sand in front of the sledge, which is now thought have been a means for increasing the stiffness of the sand in order to make the work a lot easier.³

However they did it, all of these accounts share something in common, ropes being pulled by people. No matter how ingenious their engineers were, or how much their ingenuity devised techniques for easing the burden, it still took hundreds, maybe thousands, of workers using their own strength to pull those enormous stones across the desert sands. Whether they were slaves or paid workers, or some of both, remains debated, but undoubtedly each individual was expected to do their part, and everyone had to learn to pull together.

In contemplating today’s message, it was this common idiom, “we must pull together,” that came to mind. I began researching its origins and, disappointedly, learned that it’s one of those statements with origins unknown. As a noun, the word “pull” itself is linked to a 14th century word meaning “fishing net.” This makes sense given that a fishing net is something that must be pulled out of the ocean onto a boat or shore. As a verb, it’s thought to originate from the Old English *pullian*, meaning “to pluck off, or draw out,” and seems related to the Low German word *pulen*, meaning “remove the shell or husk,” and *pûlje*, meaning, “to shell,” or, “husk,” and from the Middle Dutch, *polen*, meaning “to peel,” or strip, and from the Icelandic, *pula*, simply meaning, “work hard.”

This is interesting etymology, but it is not surprising that the word “pull” means “hard work,” just as the phrase, “pulling together,” refers to cooperation and working together. Still, I was hoping to find the etymology tracing back to the Egyptian pyramid builders who, even after four millennium, have to remain the poster children for what it means to pull together. Not only did they have to harmoniously pull ropes in what has to be the greatest tug of war in human history, but in doing so, they were able to also erect some of the oldest, strongest, and most impressive structures anybody has ever built. In other words, they prove what people, what society, what humanity and the world can accomplish when we pull together.

A lot has changed since they built the pyramids. Humans have become a lot more numerous. And, as a result, human societies have increasingly come closer together, with far fewer distinct societies than ever. Yet coming together is different from pulling together. Like forces of gravity, global population and mass communication are pulling us together but, in this scenario, we are the ones being pulled, sometimes kicking and screaming. We’re the immovable boulders being unwillingly heaved out of our quarries where we have settled in for eons, only to be dragged forcibly across the desert and stacked atop each other, not because we have pulled together, but because changing circumstances have crammed us together.

Taking a bird’s eye view, as historian Yuval Harari says, “it becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity.”⁴ The idea of unity may be good for us overall, but it is its relentless advancement that makes many of us feel like we’re the ones being pulled rather than those doing the pulling. For example, as Harari further points out, “As the twenty-first century unfolds, nationalism is fast losing ground.”⁵ This explains why so many in the world are attempting to preserve their national and patriotic identities by choosing nationalistic leaders, even if they are tyrants. “Better the devil you know,” as the saying goes. It may also explain why so many on the extreme Left are suddenly drawn toward identity politics and tribalism, as they too struggle to maintain familiar cultures and identities in response to the advent of globalization and the broader view of humanity that is now required of us.

Yet the pull of globalization and the unification of humanity will ultimately prove too difficult for these old ways of being in the world to resist. As I write in my book, *Evolution’s Way*, “The old notion that our greatest challenges stop at our imaginary borders—even if they are reinforced with guards, guns, and walls—is preposterous in our era of global economics, global employment, global business, global communications, as well as global poverty, global inequality, global warming, and global pandemics.”⁶ Likewise, in *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, moral philosopher Peter Singer says, “Until recently such thoughts have been the dreams of idealists, devoid of practical impact on the hard realities of a world of nation-states. But now we are beginning to live in a global community.”⁷ Today, as Harari succinctly explains, “almost all humans share the same geopolitical system ... the same economic system ... the same legal system; and the same scientific system.”⁸

Unfortunately, due to extreme reactions against this strange new world we find ourselves in—the precipice of global community and human unity—some of the divisions among us seem worse than ever as many people and groups instinctively attempt to cling to our old ways and, more crucially, to our old identities based on whatever Nation-State we happened to be born in. Too many in these waning countries are foolishly attempting to retreat into nationalism in the new age of globalism by choosing leaders who rise to power on the waves of xenophobia, isolationism, protectionism, and anti-elite and anti-intellectual discourse. And within many of those nations, including our own, extremists on both sides seek to deny the new reality by controlling the minds and speech of others, while ignoring the global challenges before us all.

Earlier this week, President Joe Biden visited our neighbors in Idaho and spoke of the devastating fires we have faced this summer, the hottest on record, because of Global Warming. But the Republican Governor there, Brad Little countered by calling for better federal management of our forests by cutting down trees and removing dry wood. He said this, I have little doubt, because it's still not kosher for Republican leaders to talk about what may be the greatest existential threat in human history—Global Warming. We've seen the same tribalistic politicization of the coronavirus pandemic, which has led to a new surge of the disease in our nation that is worse than the first. Our hospitals and morgues are overflowing even as millions of us still refuse to wear masks, let alone get vaccinated.

Meanwhile, the extreme Left is focusing even more narrowly on our small-minded identities by assigning our worth as individuals according to which quadrant we fit into on a simple one-page schematic that grades people based on, guess what, their race, gender, and sexuality. They may have flipped the paradigm to favor those who have historically been marginalized and oppressed, but their tactics are still based on racism, sexism, and their understanding of what sexuality ought to be. Worse, rather than actually making a difference by effectively addressing the injustices in our nation, they are neurotically obsessed with controlling our minds by restricting what words we can and can't use. It is a cult of linguistic purification enforced by a so-called cancel culture. Anyone who disagrees with them or uses words they find offensive, or even if it is discovered they used such words as children, shall be forced into social exile. In the end, the Utopian vision of this mindset is to segregate our society into distinct tribes based upon those superficial characteristics we have for centuries struggled to convince ourselves should not matter in a just world.

But what hope is there if both Republicans and Democrats are fundamentally denying, let alone failing to address, the new reality and the global problems we should all be pulling together to address? Firstly, it is a classic fallacy to presume that by talking about the Republican or Democratic parties that I am talking about individual Republicans and Democrats. Nor by talking about Liberalism or Conservatism am I speaking about liberal or conservative persons. This logical error is aptly named the “Fallacy of Division.” It occurs when the qualities attributed to a class as a whole are attributed to its individual members. It's like saying French fries are made out of potatoes, therefore all potatoes are French fries, or, more apropos, voters elected a White

Nationalist to Office, therefore the voters are all White Nationalists, or the Extreme Left wants to end Capitalism, therefore all liberals are socialists.

This fallacy, which paints everyone with one broad stroke, is part of the reason we are so divided today, because we forget that, like ourselves, individuals are complex, multifaceted entities, even if the organizations, groups, and identities they are partly associated with are simple to define. A few years ago, for example, Noam Chomsky, a well-known liberal American linguist and political activist, created a stir by saying, "Today's Republican Party is the most dangerous organization in human history."⁹ At the time, like most anyone, I considered this precisely the kind of hyperbolic statement that makes for a good headline, but little more. But after this summer, the hottest in history, when we have watched our world burn in unprecedented ways, and a global pandemic unnecessarily surge again in our nation, largely because the Republican Party has officially denied the significance of both, I can't imagine an organization that has ever posed a greater existential threat to our species.

I know, that's quite an audacious statement. But whether you agree with it or not, let's say it is true: the statement says a great deal about the Republican Party as a group, but nothing about its individual members, anymore than it can be said that anyone who votes for a Democrat must be a socialist. My guess is the one thing most voters share in common is that we are all too often left with little choice but to vote for the lesser of two evils, based upon whom we think best represents our personal interests and the interests of our particular communities. No doubt, some voters are Party purists, but many are not. Many who voted for Trump, for example, will quickly admit they didn't agree with much that he said and don't like him as a person. But if you happen to live in America's rural rustbelt, coal country, or breadbasket, which have been economically devastated by the globalized economy and, increasingly, by the advance of clean energy technologies, responsible for killing the jobs in your community, causing your friends and children to leave town while you are stuck with paying for a property you now can't sell for a fraction of what it was once worth, you might be willing to settle, even if it means forgetting some of your other concerns and values, for somebody who promises to make things great again. Even if it's just another empty promise, at least someone is addressing your concerns and offering you a little hope.

In the meantime, voters like me continue to vote for democratic candidates even though few of them ever inspire me. In fact, I disagree a lot with most of the individuals I've voted for in my life. But, given my political and social priorities, which include greater fairness and justice in our society and addressing Global Warming, I'm left with little other choice. Although I do believe the Government should tax and then generously spend its resources reinvesting in our communities and our welfare, I consider myself a Capitalist and fear any economic agenda that would attempt to artificially control the distribution of resources at the expense of our ideological and linguistic freedoms. I am a liberal, not because I believe in Socialism, but because I am devoted to freedom, reason, and tolerance for every person in the world.

I bring this Fallacy of Division up now because it is among the routine mistakes responsible for dividing so many of us. Republican and Democrat voters, conservatives and liberals have become like enemies in our society, rather than acting like neighbors who live in the same communities and share as much in common as we are different. We may disagree about who to vote for, but why can't we still be good friends? Likewise, the ideology of the extreme Left is so divisive it condemns us for inspiring each other if we have different racial and cultural identities. Classical music is white supremacist, the ideologues claim, but if you are white, you better not play jazz or the blues, and let's go back and posthumously condemn Elvis for playing rock n' roll. Stay in your segregated, racialized, gendered, sexualized, preordained lane.

Instead of continuing these disturbing divisive patterns, instead of being the immovable stones being pulled from the deep quarries and positions we have comfortably settled into, resisting those forces dragging us into new structures, let us see ourselves as those doing the pulling. Even with their impressive, though primitive technologies and their understanding of geometry and engineering, the pyramids, which have lasted thousands of years and remain among the most impressive structures in human history, were mostly built by people pulling together. That is the lesson of history, that we can accomplish great things by pulling together. If we pull our resources, even if only a few fish and loaves of bread, we discover we can feed multitudes. We have known this truth for thousands of years, at least since the Egyptians built those pyramids. The phrase, "United we stand, divided we fall," has been quoted by many a modern politician, but it can be traced back all the way to Aesop's fables 2600 years ago.

Similarly, the Swahili word, *harambee*, means "all pull together," and is part of a Kenyan tradition of communities holding different fundraising events to help themselves by pulling their resources. It's such an important principle that the word is written on their national flag and is the nation's official motto. It originated toward the end of the 19th century during the construction of the 700-mile Uganda Railway from Mombasa to Kampala. When workers had to pull together to lift heavy loads, they together say, "har har Ambey," which means "hail Ambey," a Hindu Goddess said to help with performing difficult jobs.

This reminds me of the nautical phrase, "heave, ho," used by ship and boat crews when hoisting anchors and raising masts. There is something about pulling together that is poetic, if not musical in its harmony of movement, that it give birth to shared phrase and sometimes song. That's what pulling together requires, each person pulling and releasing at once. It's hard work and requires a willingness to work with others, to be aware of them, to coordinate and collaborate with them.

Heave, ho sounds a lot like the Chinese phrase, "gung ho." It's something even American's say in references to someone who is extremely enthusiastic. But the phrase emerged in the 1930s, at time of war, poverty and a devastating flood responsible for killing millions and turning millions more into refugees. The International Committee for the Promotion of Industrial Chinese Cooperatives was formed to help address this crisis. "Its mission was organizing the unemployed workers and refugees for production to support the War of Resistance."¹⁰ As a cooperative, the

industry was run democratically by the workers who would often say “gung ho” while laboring to make things like blankets and uniforms. The term is composed of the Chinese characters meaning “enthusiasm” and “industry,” with together means, “industrial cooperative,” or simply, “work together.”

Today we share many major global challenges, like pandemics, global warming, and refugee crises. Addressing these problems will be at least as challenging as building the pyramids, but we can succeed so long as we remember the lesson of the Egyptians that has been repeated throughout history, that United we stand, divided we fall, har har Ambey, Heave-ho, Gung Ho, that to do great things and overcome difficult challenges we must pull together as Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, as a nation and as a planet-wide species. Let us celebrate our differences, recognize our similarities, and learn to live and work together as one.

¹ Denning, Peter J. and Tedre, Matti, *Computational Thinking*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2019, p. 11.

² <http://www.sci-news.com/archaeology/ramp-system-alabaster-quarry-egypt-06582.html>

³ “Colossus on a Sledge,” Tomb of Djehutihotep, 1900 BCE.

⁴ Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version) loc. 2562.

⁵ Ibid. loc. 3185

⁶ Eklof, Todd F., *Evolution’s Way: Toward Exponentially Higher States of Complexity, Consciousness, and Unity*, Oakleaf Press, Spokane, WA, 2020.

⁷ Singer, Peter, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, 2nd ed., Yale University Press, U.S. 2004, p. 196.

⁸ Harari, ibid, loc., 2607,

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/noam-chomsky-republican-party-most-dangerous-organisation-human-history-us-politics-mit-linguist-a7706026.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/10/18/406693323/the-long-strange-journey-of-gung-ho>